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Vietnam: The Revised Version

Less than a year after the fall of Saigon, the government's top Asia experts informed Henry Kissinger and the Pentagon in a secret report that the Communist victory in Vietnam hadn't really changed the balance of power in Southeast Asia after all.

In other words, the analysts' 20-20 hindsight confirmed what critics of the Vietnam war had been saying for years: U.S. involvement was unnecessary. The Red Menace and the "domino theory," which had been used to justify the expenditure of blood and money, were not valid, the experts concluded. It had all been a tragic mistake.

The secret memorandum, dated April 1, 1975, was prepared for the secretaries of state and defense and the Central Intelligence Agency director. Its authors were top staff members from State, the Pentagon and the CIA, assigned to the National Security Council.

The analysts offered an in-depth analysis of the situation in Southeast Asia as they saw it 11 months after what they candidly called "the Indo-China debacle."

Referring to another buzz word used by Vietnam hawks to explain our costly intervention—"credibility"—the authors noted: "The impact on U.S. credibility was mitigated by the fact most nations considered Vietnam a lost cause in the long run whatever the U.S. did...."

The secret report noted that "non-communist Asian nations still look to the United States as a counterweight to the mistrusted communists, and as a highly desirable economic partner." The writers even conceded a bright side to our failure:

"With the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, a divisive issue was removed from the Japanese internal political scene, greatly facilitating closer security cooperation with the United States on the part of this key ally," they said.

They then concluded that, despite the hysterical warnings of the war years, the much-dreaded Communist victory didn't really amount to the national disaster for the United States that had been predicted.

"In sum," the report admitted, "except for the loss of Indo-China itself, the impact of the end of the conflict has largely been to accelerate existing trends in the Asia-Pacific region. There remains great continuity with the past and in the short-term drastic changes elsewhere in the region are unlikely.

"The major power equilibrium—among the U.S., U.S.S.R., China and Japan—has not been radically altered."

In short, the Communists were not, after all, going to be landing in California or Hawaii as a result of our defeat in Indochina. Our efforts to turn back the tide of Communist expansion in Southeast Asia was futile and foredoomed.

Noting the factors that underlie the power balance in the region—Sino-Soviet rivalry, continuing U.S. military presence, the U.S.-Japanese alliance and the two allies' economic predominance there—the NSC experts reported that "these factors are likely to remain substantially valid for at least the next several years...."

In an appraisal of Hanoi's relations with the Soviet Union that would have been considered heresy 5 or 10 years earlier, they concluded: "Even in Indo-China, the U.S.S.R. role is limited despite the visible increase in Soviet 'presence' and apparent influence following Hanoi's triumph. The problem here is that Hanoi is independent-minded, and even its flaunting of its Soviet connection is not for Soviet benefit but for Hanoi's own political defenses against China."

Noting that the Vietnamese would be leery of offending the Chinese by too close cooperation with the Russians, the analysts said: "But more important than Hanoi's presumed reluctance to push China too far is Hanoi's own interest in using the Soviet Union as a counter-foil only up to a point far short of Soviet dominance. Moscow is too far removed geographically to control this game; it is as manipulatable by Hanoi as it is able to manipulate."

It is accepted wisdom now to view President Carter's visit to Japan as the dawn of a new era in our Far East policies. In truth, this "new era" was born under the aegis of Henry Kissinger. Administration sources told our associate Tom Rosenstiel that President Carter, with a few exceptions, has not changed the NSC guidelines.

"In general," they urge, "we need to pursue our interests with greater subtlety, more reliance on riding the waves of existing trends in the area, greater use of our diplomatic and, hopefully, economic tools and greater flexibility in tactics."

The primary consideration, the NSC report says, is U.S. security—"preventing the domination of East Asia by a single hostile power or combination of powers." The "domino theory" of a Communist takeover has been consigned to the dustbin by the NSC analysts, and Carter is apparently content to leave it there. Both the official guidelines and Carter strategists agree that we should risk a nuclear confrontation only if Japan is in danger of domination by the Communists, or there is "a clear and overwhelming threat" to our forces in Korea.

What we do to help Southeast Asian nations resist communism will of course be important, the report says, adding: "Of even more importance is what we do *not* do. We must not overly embrace them in ways that embarrass them before their Third World peers or which arouse tender national sensitivities felt by the weak in the presence of the strong. We must take heed of their sense of sovereignty and welcome an inevitable greater independence from us that is the corollary of greater strength and maturity. And we must be careful with gratuitous advice."

If the Asia experts' counsel is heeded by President Carter, we may indeed be entering a new era in our relations with the Southeast Asians.